35.

Hatred, Grudges, and Unspeakable Meanness: The World of the TPLF

There are times when words are not enough to explain and rationalize the ill will that drives human beings to acts of meanness of indescribable wantonness. An unnecessary border dispute has become monostroulsy murderous because that's how the TPLF wanted to play it. Blinded by hatred, crippled by uncontrollable grudges, and spurred by unspeakable meanness, the TPLF went on a rampage of destruction and mayhem for no logical reason shattered the foundation of peaceful coexistence that has served Eritreans and Ethiopians well for many generations.

What motivated the Ethiopian troops who destroyed and vandalized Tessenei, Guluj, Barentu and scores of other places they briefly occupied? Why? Their hatred of Eritreans and Eritrea cannot be so deep, so immobilizing, that they can vandalize private homes and desecrate holy places and cemetaries with reckless abandon. What is it that Eritreans have done that they have been subjected to indescribable bestiality from people they saw as neighbors? Aren't these the very kinfolks of the 100,000 or so who live and work peacefully in Eritrea? Is this what Eritreans deserve for all their good will and civility? If we ask many questions, it is only because we are at a loss to find a rational explanation for the TPLF's madness.

In the blind rampages we have seen since May 12, we see the desire to humiliate Eritrean civilians as the driving force. Putting aside for the time being why it was even necessary to humiliate, we have to ask ourselves whether the Ethiopians have succeeded. In order to humiliate someone, one has to force the submission of the "other." Conversely, the "other" has to give in and acknowledge the domination of the other. Except for rape, the purest form of humiliation where the victim is too helpless too resist, nothing the troops have done has elicited anything resembling submission. Instead the occupying troops were met with defiance.

Surely civilians have been murdered in cold blood or burned alive in their huts. But they were murdered or burned alive precisely because they refused to submit. Far from humiliating civilians, the invading troops earned the scorn of their potential victims. All the looting and destruction could not change the fact that Eritrean civilians stared down the invaders, which in itself was a humiliating experience for the gun toting goons. The rampages of hate and trails of destruction are nothing but failed attempts to exorcise the terminal inferiority complex that the TPLF leadership has been suffering since the founding of the TPLF twenty-five years ago.

Ethiopian soldiers have a long history of pillaging and looting, whether they marched under Ras Alula or Meles Zenawi. Their behavior has not changed a bit. In a way it is what we should expect. There is a method to the madness. First they loot and then they burn the humble dwellings. Sometimes, as in Guluj, they burn the occupants alive. Why? Does anyone know? Perhaps war has a way of brutalizing soldiers and under certain circumstances troops do take leave of their senses. Even then their political leaders must bear the ultimate responsibility as established by the Nuremberg Trials.

But what explains the mendacity of civilians, from whom one has every right to expect civility. Ethiopian civilians, no, say Tigreans, calling a spade a spade, coming in empty trucks to loot is too incomprehensible. What got into them that they came to loot their neighbors? Are the "grudges" they have been carrying, however justified, and they are not, so crippling that they would get up to do harm to the people they have lived with all these years? Is their hatred so blinding that they have become oblivious to the legacy of hatred they are leaving behind?

Meles and his comrades have been telling Eritreans that the TPLF was on the side of the "oppressed masses" of Eritrea. "Radio Woyane" had been telling Eritreans that the "glorious" Ethiopian army was marching towards Asmara to bring democracy and peace to Eritrea. But their troops gang rape elderly ladies and say they are pro-people. They shoot civilians point blank, and say they are for peace. They demonize the Eritrean political leadership to no end, and then turn around and brutalize ordinary Eritreans, leaving no doubt that in ordinary Eritreans they see enemies to humiliate, loot and destroy. Their Orwellian misuse of language is without parallel. The same question recurs: What planet do TPLF's leaders come from? Does anyone know? We see what they are doing, but we can't fathom what drives them to unspeakable meanness.

The destruction was far from random. It was systematic, purposeful and meant to hurt. Economic assets and institutions were specially targeted. The type of purposeful destruction the TPLF wrought in the towns and villages it temporarily occupied falls under the definition of "Crime Against Humanity."

This is how a BBC reporter described what he saw in Tessenei (June 21):

> *The hospital has been completely stripped. Medicine, equipment, even beds have been taken. The church's kindergarten has also been looted. The school has been burnt, along with two banks, the petrol station, a grain store and the local administration building.*

What are these people made off that they target hospitals, schools, churches and mosques? What explains such purposeful destruction of institutions that make people whole: that educate and that provide spiritual sustenance? All one can do is ask questions, plenty of questions, since there are no rational explanations. We can almost see what would have happened had people not been evacuated before the marauding soldiers came into town: the Rwandaization of the Horn region. With so much hate spewing from "Radio Woyane," it is no surprise that ordinary people descended to animalistic levels.

No one who has studied the evolution of the conflict would have guessed the wanton brutality of the Ethiopian army or the bestiality of its civilian accomplices. No one. But then very few have paid attention to the daily ration of pure poison coming out of the TPLF's news outlets. It is one thing to have a border dispute, a political dispute, but to transform it into the worst kind of blood feud is unheard of. In the past one could expect village elders and religious leaders, people with recognized moral authority, to counsel restraint. One wanders if there are any people of good will left to beseech the invaders and looters to stop. Where is the moral authority of religious leaders, now that the faithful desperately need them? Where is the Ethiopian Tewhado Orthodox Church, whose members have been on a destructive rampage of rape, murder, and looting?

There have been disturbing reports that priests in several Ethiopian cities have refused to perform burial or baptism rituals when the Eritrean faithful request such services. If true, nothing can be further from the word of God. The priest becomes a political hack, unfit to administer the word of God to people of faith. The ethnicization of Ethiopian politics may have corrupted the church beyond repair to the point that regular church members could commit acts of cruelty against the "other" without fear of reproach from the local priests. *Even the prayer mats have been taken from the mosque,* as the same BBC reported continued.

Is war so dehumanizing that people have the capacity to descend to the lowest levels of human civilization? What drives ordinary people, pious people, people who presumably attend church regularly vandalize a place of worship? Does the fact that it's a mosque and not a church make it easier to desecrate the house of worship?

This war has brutalized Ethiopia in a way the past wars did not. In the

recent past, wars were against the state. This one is more than that. It's against ordinary people, Ethiopians and Eritreans. What we have here is an Ethiopian state that has cavalierly condemned tens of thousands of its own people as *fengiregatchs*, human mine sweepers, dispatching them to certain death over a mundane border issue that could have been solved without the shedding of a drop of blood. But a State that practices unspeakable meanness against its own people cannot be expected to behave in a civilized manner against those it had called enemies.

There are no words to describe the meanness that triggered the dumping of 1000 Eritreans a few days ago, on the banks of the Gash River while knowing full well that crossing the mighty water was hazardous. How much contempt does the TPLF have towards the peace process that its minions would forcibly evict Eritreans from their homes, possibly in occupied Eritrea, at a time when legal experts from Eritrea and Ethiopia were meeting to lay the groundwork for a peaceful resolution to the terrible conflict? Seven years ago in Asmara, Prime Minister Meles begged the Eritrean people not to "scratch your wounds," to let bygones be bygones. Eritreans obliged. They forgot and forgave. Now not only is he scratching their wounds, he's lacerating them with a dull knife, adding salt and vinegar to induce a gangrene-like condition in a botched surgical attempt to justify an illegal amputation.

Call it meanness or hatred, "it" has turned Ethiopia's current rulers into paragons of evil. The matter-of-factness of their evil acts is truly astounding. It comes close to what Hanna Arndt had in mind when she talked about the "banality of evil." The German philosopher was talking about the ubiquitousness of evil in Nazi Germany. The TPLF's blinding hatred, crippling grudges, and unspeakable meanness fit the mind set that created the world of the Nazis like a glove. Ethiopians of good will, and there must be some, should not allow evil to take root in their land. The warning signs are clear. They are flashing everywhere. Today the TPLF has come after Eritreans in Ethiopia; tomorrow it will be the Oromos' turn. And the day after? Well, of course, the Amharas. It's worth repeating that evil triumphs if people of good will remain silent. Too many good people in Ethiopia, especially the Amharas, have remained silent, seduced as they have been by TPLF's dangling of Assab in front of their faces. But Assab will remain Eritrean, now and forever. The TPLF knows this. It's about time for others to know the same.

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